

MUNICIPALITIES: PUTTING HALF-PENNY FUNDS TO WORK FOR RESIDENTS

Commuting to work used to be a daily hassle for Edward Rodríguez-Vado, but a colorful blast from the past is turning the trip to the office into a pleasurable experience for the Kendall resident.

Every morning after taking the Metrorail to the Douglas Road Station, Rodríguez-Vado hops on a red, green and yellow trolley-style bus that harkens back to Coral Gables' pioneer days.

"It's extremely convenient and saves a lot of money for gas," said Rodríguez-Vado, a paralegal at a Coral Gables law firm. "It's very nice and comfortable, and the drivers are courteous."

The City Beautiful is reaching into its past to solve contemporary traffic congestion and parking problems by reviving its trolley service of the 1920s with a new fleet of five vintage-style – but very modern – vehicles.

Since they began operating in November 2003, the new fuel-efficient gas turbine engine hybrid trolleys, which are free to ride, have transported more than 250,000 people to work, shopping centers and other destinations around Coral Gables.

"It's easy, dependable and you can set your clock by it," said Coral Gables Trolley Manager Ed Cox.

The Coral Gables trolley is just one of the many success stories that has been made possible by the half-penny transportation surtax that voters overwhelmingly approved in November 2002.

The ordinance establishing the People's Transportation Plan calls for 20 percent of surtax proceeds to be distributed on a pro-rata basis to the county's municipalities. To date, municipalities have received over \$37 million in surtax funds for transportation and transit initiatives, such as circulator buses, bus shelters, road resurfacing and drainage projects. And residents around the county are seeing the benefits.

In Sweetwater, the half-penny is funding a free bus circulator service, with a regularly scheduled route that allows mostly elderly riders to make doctor visits and go to the grocery store.

In North Miami, the city recently began its free NoMi Express community bus service, which operates four routes that crisscross the city. The \$480,000-a-year service is funded by the half-penny surtax, as well as a grant from the Florida Department of Transportation.

Meanwhile, Hialeah – the county's second largest municipality



– is using half-penny funds to operate its new system of 10 buses serving nearly 230,000 passengers since January 2004. Begun in 2002, the system now consists of two well-used routes, including a stop at the Hialeah Metrorail station.

"It's been pretty successful," said Hialeah Acting Transit Manager Jorge de la Nuez. "I've had very good feedback from residents who call in and praise us and say 'Thanks.'"

Hialeah's system also serves as a model for how cities can maximize their use of surtax dollars by partnering with neighboring municipalities on transit projects. Under a joint funding partnership, one of the city's new routes crosses city lines to make several stops in Hialeah Gardens, including a stop at the Wal-Mart Supercenter.

Hialeah is also using its half-penny funds to perform major roadway improvements around the city, including the \$5.5 million reconstruction of Northwest 62nd Avenue, which broke ground in May 2004.

Like Coral Gables, the City of Miami is looking to its past – and the half-penny tax – for solutions to urban gridlock with its ambitious plans to bring back the electric streetcar – a staple of early 20th century Miami.

Phase 1 would run from downtown Miami to Northeast 79th Street at a cost of between \$120

million and \$130 million. Projected for completion in 2007 or 2008, the system would come just in time for the area's condo development boom. Long-range plans call for service to midtown Miami and the county's light-rail BayLink project, which would connect downtown Miami to South Beach.

"We're very gratified that so many municipalities have come up with innovative ways to tackle congestion and improve transportation with their share of the half-penny," said Luis Morse, Vice-Chairperson of the Citizens' Independent Transportation Trust, which was created to oversee expenditure of the surtax.

"Our citizens can expect to see more and more transportation improvements at the municipal and county level in the coming months. The CITT, county government and our staff are fully committed to fulfilling the promises made to the voters almost two years ago," added Marc Buoniconti, CITT Chairperson.

Thanks to the PTP, Miami-Dade residents and commuters can continue to look forward to improved roads and better options for getting around.

***The People's Transportation Plan,
your half-penny at work!***

